DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 521 CS 010 236

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TITLE Teach Us (Then) What We Need to Know (Now).
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
-- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Bound Students; *College Preparation; High Schools; *Reading Instruction; *Student Attitudes; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

At the final session of a course designed to increase reading efficiency for college study, the students were asked, hypothetically, to inform the principal of their high school if there were any preparations for college which, in their opinion, should have been included in the high school years. Students' suggestions fell into the following categories: curriculum subjects and studies; individual students' concerns and behaviors; and procedures and attitudes of the professional staff. Proposed implementation of students' comments include: (1) adding opportunities for research-type papers; (2) scheduling long-term assignments in addition to short-term ones; (3) signalling particular types of writing for every need; (4) encouraging teacher modeling of reading for many purposes; (5) inviting college students to talk to high school students; and (6) combating "senioritis" by emphasizing effort, achievement, and advanced and independent study. (RS)

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Teach Us [Then] What We Need to Know [Now]

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Teach Us [Then] What We Need to Know [Now]

It was like so many thoughts which spring from a teacher's mind during the surge from inspiration to exhilaration, with occasional levelling pauses. At the final session of the course designed to increase reading efficiency for college study, I asked the students a hypothetical question. "The principal of your high school asked you if there were any preparations for college which in your opinion, should have been included in the high school years". Many of the undergraduate students had enrolled in the college reading skills course at the suggestion of their advisor. Many of them didn't perceive any need since they had achieved good grades through deliberate work effort. They indicated early that they enrolled to be accommodating. A few others from the upper classes sought out the reading course to sharpen reading efficiency for graduate school. Although the students had entered the class with different agendas, during the span of the semester they had become a cohesive, working group, expecting and respecting varied interests, opinions and experience. Their response to my question was immediate, eager, and intensive. They wrote copiously. I had not expected the mood of "I'm so glad you asked me!"

After reading and rereading the students' statements, it became apparent that there was repetition in what was being said. The students offered written suggestions to their principals through objective notes, hypothetical letters or a creative address to high school seniors. Among the approximately 200 responses, gathered over four semesters, comparatively few students were enthusiastic about the preparatory college skills course in their high schools. Although these students reported that the skills were helpful, many noted the difference in *how* the skills were applied in the actual college study experience.

At the risk of basing any summary of recommendations on the responses of the large number of first-year students, I distributed the hypothetical question to graduating seniors in the teacher certification program. Although their statements were written well, cogent, professionally organized, and documented by experience, their suggestions to the principal were essentially similar to those of the others.

Themes of the Responses

The students' suggestions fell into three major categories: [1] academic or relating to curriculum subjects and studies; [2] personal or relating to the individual student's concerns and behavior; and [3] faculty/administration or procedures and attitudes of the professional staff.

The Academic category includes appeals for *more* reading and literature and vocabulary; *more* writing and writing skills; *more* research papers; and *more* computer courses. Specific suggestions culled from student responses urge : "class writing under pressure"; "use of words and form satisfactory to college teachers"; " writing essays in a short period of time as on college exams"; "stress on writing and reading"; "effective reading and speed reading for the great deal of reading required in college courses"; "how to do research"; "extensive preparation in writing"; "a course in how to study and read textbooks"; "improving reading skills with short stories, newspapers, outside readings that tell the real world"; "stress on reading and vocabulary"; "intense reading and writing".

The Personal category stresses *more* skills in personal time management and long-range planning; *more* preparation for abundance and pressure of college assignments; *more* independent responsibility for work, less monitoring and pacing of assignments.

Several students chose to express their ideas directly to high school

seniors:

"Get prepared for college before you just take off and go."

" College is an entirely different league from high school, heavier work load, classes are bigger."

"Learn to be organized; biggest thing is you're on your own."

"You must put an equal amount of time on the outside to benefit from your classes."

"You cover more work in a shorter time."

"Don't take it too easy the last year in high school to avoid culture shock at college."

"Senior year should be based on college courses with college-type electives."

"It is essential to be involved in a great deal of reading assignments."

"Read more and more books."

Write papers and essays as often as you can."

"The more you write, the easier it will be in college."

The Faculty/Administration category warns against "senioritis" by urging more assignments [not fewer], heavier student program [not lighter], college oriented studies [not diversions]. Testing and grading suggestions include more frequent testing and cumulative testing as opposed to interval testing, with college criteria used in evaluation and grading. Assignments in high school, students believe, should be more challenging and more frequent. In students' words:

"Dear Principal,

I encourage faculty to grade harder to encourage competition among students... Give students long-term assignments and not remind them of the due dates to teach responsibility he or she will have in college... Change standardized testing from multiple-choice to essay questions...

College professors want to see how well students can express themselves. Thanks for asking for my help."

Further student suggestions include:

"Establish two-hour exams."

"Teach more college level courses, to prepare for the big change."

"Schools are not strict enough. They practically take you by the hand to get through school years."

"Teachers and administrators baby kids too much. When they get to college they go into shock. They are on their own and not used to being independent. Prepare kids to be independent."

"Allow student liberty. There's no one to look over you in college."

"Students need a sampling of courses to find out what they wanted to do in the future."

"Teachers should encourage good grades for students in their classes, not give up if a students is not trying."

"Don't let students copy notes off the board. Let them take notes like college students do. It's better if they foul up taking notes in high school than to foul up taking them in college."

"Maybe there could be a big seminar interviewing college freshmen from around the country to see <u>their</u> reactions to college life."

"I wish teachers made it harder to cheat."

"If teachers would bring just a small amount of the large world into the classroom it may encourage the students to want to learn and realize it is necessary to know the information."

"I feel that there should be some elective seminars and courses that are strictly college-prep. The only college- prep courses that were in high school were for the advanced students rather than geared for all students planning to attend college."

"If a foreign language was taught at a younger age, vocabulary and understanding of the English language would be improved."

"If students were to start taking elective courses in high school on the subject they will be studying in college, they will be ahead of the game."

Responding Through Design

Converting student statements into proposed implementation depends more on our awareness of their message than on any dramatic or major change in curriculum content or scheduling. Consider these renewing ways:

[1] *Add opportunities for research-type papers* in all courses, with the arts as well as more traditionally in social studies. Create initial designs for exploration and inquiry, provide models for form of a research paper, demonstrate research procedures, and invite sharing of reports. A rationale for each step gives purpose to the teacher's guidelines. Collaborative research, with students working in small groups, is a heralded preview for individual research papers.

[2] *The scheduling of assignments and tests* is apparently begging our attention. Short-term assignments, prevalent and useful, need to be complemented by long-term assignments of papers and study for exams. It may be helpful and realistic to encourage student planning over longer spans to complete an assignment or to prepare for a cumulative test. Teachers take justified pride in supervising student achievement and in encouraging their progress. A long-range component adds to the student's self-monitoring of time and study. In other words, a "term paper" is assigned, with guidelines, early in the year for independent work. A test can cover large units of content in contrast to more frequent quiz type tests of small areas. With earlier planning practice, prospective college students can avoid an inescapable fact of the "college culture shock".

[3] *Writing is signalled for every need.* Students speak of "more"

writing and then proceed to enumerate a range from grammar instruction to creative writing, from writing essays in haste in class to writing about research, from taking notes in a class lecture to taking notes from a text. What we teach as expository and narrative can be incorporated into the wider curriculum, or across the curriculum. This in fact, is characteristic of the current emphasis on the Whole Language approach. We can not only describe and characterize types of writing, but also link the particular writing need to the development of the writing schema or conceptual framework. In teaching through function and practice, we establish and strengthen the base for continuing growth. It is this base which the students identify as needing "more".

[4] *Reading* is perhaps like a hall of mirrors. The more we read the greater the numbers of reflections. The more varied our posture or mood, the greater the numbers of variations or distortions in reflections. Students who are burdened by reading assignments, miss the exhilaration we wish for them. Students whose reading is mutilated by a teaching approach of dissection cannot develop perspective. Teachers labor to avoid such pitfalls. Perhaps this is where we can truly learn with the students, by being examples of readers who read for many purposes. There is great satisfaction, when equipped with identified skills, in reading for information and reading for study. There is pleasure and wonder of human nature in personal reading. Both dimensions of reading not only require but demand a teacher's attention, guidance, example and sharing. We seek to encourage our students to read with horizons...their own as well as ours for them.

[5] *Invite the college students* to explain about college, we are advised. Most high schools already have such a program in place. It is the purpose and timing of the program which is faulted. The College Day ... or

Night... or Fair... is held to exchange information about respective colleges, in advance of the selection and application by the high school student. The difference between this and the reported, and repeated, suggestion is clear. Invite college students early in the senior year to speak about the preparation for, and the subsequent adjustment to college life. The primary purpose here is to reveal the compelling demands of self-management, independent work, personal responsibility for needs and academic requirements, relating to peers and staff, and the vital importance of scholarly competencies of reading and writing and computer skills. Direct, personal contact with the anticipated peer group adds authenticity to frequent classroom references.

[6] Finally, the entire scope of *Senioritis* deserves attention. The fourth year or senior year of high school, has earned a proper name, noted in student papers with the capitalization. The characteristics of Senioritis include less academic work, more "frill" courses, abundant leisure time and generally a waiting period to graduation. The recommendation of the college students, in retrospect, is the direct opposite in content, in attitude, in effort and in achievement... with wide reading, refinement of writing, advance study, and emphasis on independent study for the college-bound seniors.

Collaborating Perceptions

If these few student perceptions are representative of larger numbers of their peers, we can consider seriously their views of college needs which could be strengthened earlier at the high school level. Two inferences can be made. First, the students repeatedly refer to "more" of specific activities, suggesting that they exist even minimally. Second, the students apparently do not perceive the school efforts as being as supportive as intentioned. Even with high school curriculum programming

as college preparation, elements of pacing and supervision for some students may warrant consideration. What these college students perceive from their direct experience is indeed designed in retrospect. We cannot assume that given the situations they suggest, even during the senior year of high school, the students could or would applaud school efforts and demands. Neither can we assume that they would not. The "shock" of change in course content and academic skills, procedures, pacing, responsibility, and time management may continue as the perceptual if not conceptual dichotomy between the high school and college levels. Within the broad schema of instruction and administration however, there are student perceptions which suggest direct attention, and student voices which are clear. The responses to my hypothetical " *If* you were asked....." are earnest and honest. In teaching *then* what they need to know *now*, we are teaching *now* what they need to know *when* [they are in college].